

CHAPTER 2

Sustainable Development

In 2015, the United Nations called sustainable development a global issue that needed concerted international effort to address. The elements that made up sustainable development as a global challenge had already long existed and had been recognized as such. The concept of sustainable development, however, presented an integrated view on several interconnected global problems that international actors could work with. Sustainable development, therefore, is a term that stands for a goal (this is what the world should strive for), a means (this is how it should be done), and a global challenge (to reach this goal and deploy the means, concerted efforts are needed).

From development aid to sustainable development

The precursor of sustainable development was **development aid**. This was the financial aid extended by rich countries to poor countries (later rephrased in the aid from ‘developed’ to ‘underdeveloped’ countries). This financial assistance has been motivated and criticized for a variety of reasons. Motivations for such aid was the argument by former colonized countries that the former colonizers had a debt to pay for their colonizing practices.

Pros and cons of development aid

“A constant stream of ‘free’ money is a perfect way to keep an inefficient or simply bad government in power. As aid flows in, there is nothing more for the government to do – it doesn’t need to raise taxes, and as long as it pays its army, it doesn’t have to take account off its disgruntled citizens.”

(Economist Dambisa Moyo in *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*, 2010).

“Aid can help to build the free press, or support the training and recruitment of judges, civil society, and independent audit institutions. In fact, aid can play an important part in fighting corruption through generating public demand to end it.”

(Oxfam International, *Good Aid*, YouTube 23 April 2010)

Motivations from within ‘developed’ countries were often framed in terms of civic or religious (usually Christian) duty: fellow human beings needed to be helped. Critics argued that this aid was a continuation of colonization, whereby the ‘developed’

countries maintain control over the lifelines of 'developing' countries. Other critics pointed at the lack of success of this aid, which to them was a waste of or even the very reason that developing countries remained underdeveloped.

In the late 1980s, a change took place in the Western world in the way they looked at the world. This was allegedly prompted by the songs *Feed the World* and *Do They know it's Christmas* sung by a large group of top Western musicians, but the main cause was most likely the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Somehow, a general conviction emerged that it was not ideologies (communism, liberalism) that were important, but rather the wellbeing of humankind. Based on these ideas, the United Nations developed the ambitious project of the **Millennium Development Goals**. These were eight goals that were to be met in the first fifteen years of the new millennium, beginning in 2000 and ending by 2015. While this project still had the characteristics of development aid – rich countries gave bi-lateral financial assistance to poor countries – it was the first time that these endeavors were undertaken multilaterally and globally. This approach gave the project a sense of global urgency although the good intentions were not enough to reach the goals within the given time.

Millennium Development Goals (2000 - 2015)

- 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- 2 Achieve universal primary education.
- 3 Promote gender equality and empower women.
- 4 Reduce child mortality.
- 5 Improve maternal health.
- 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- 7 Ensure environmental sustainability.
- 8 Global partnership for development.

For that reason, a new set of goals was agreed for the next fifteen years. These were the **Sustainable Development Goals**, as agreed by the United Nations, and they were to be met by 2030. The Sustainable Development goals were not just a continuation of the Millennium goals, they were instead a different concept entirely. It was recognized that everything that was related to human well-being was interconnected, so that help in one area would be of little use if other areas were not also addressed. So, for instance, when donors bring in agricultural equipment to work the fields, but there are no trained mechanics to repair this equipment, then within several years this equipment becomes useless. Or one can help a village increase its fruit production, but to make that profitable they need roads and trucks to move it out,

and to build these roads one may run into corrupt government officials. Or one may provide pumps to drill for more wells but if this means a depletion of ground water, then in the long run the land will be unfit for agriculture, and its erosion will affect all nearby lands. From these experiences grew the realization that all issues of development are interrelated and therefore need an interrelated approach.

Sustainable development goals (simplified):

What is to be sustained:

Nature: Earth, Biodiversity, Ecosystems

Life support: Ecosystem, Resources, Environment

Community: Cultures, Groups, Places

What is to be developed:

People: Life expectancy, Education, Equity, Equal opportunity

Economy: Wealth, Productive sectors, Consumption

Society: Institutions, Social capital, States, Regions

From all these ideas and experiences grew the realization that these sustainable development goals were targets not only for a few countries, but for the entire world. This was not a new idea. Ever since the 1970s, several informal societies of politicians and scientists had come up with similar ideas and visions. But now the ideas were turned into policy globally.

Indicators and targets

A practical problem that faces these optimistic endeavors is the confusion about terminology, data, and measurement. How do we measure the success of reaching sustainable development goals? Basically, this is done by means of targets and indicators. The **targets** are the Sustainable Development Goals. The **indicators** are how one measures. Most indicators that measure the success rate of sustainable development activities use some form of quantification: the radio program promoting democracy has had forty hours of airtime, the minimum income in that country has gone up by five percent, a hundred more people in this town have access to clean water. Numbers are an easy way to measure things, but they are not always suitable for a given situation. For instance, poverty is usually measured on the basis of income, and the standard of extreme poverty is set by the World Bank to an income of less than one dollar a day. However, while some communities that have been living in forests all their lives might meet that standard, they do not necessarily live

in extreme poverty, as is perhaps the case for people in cities with five or ten dollars a day.

It is therefore recognized that these indicators do not always reflect the reality of the targets. For many academics it is reason to avoid using them as much as possible (although many cannot find it hard resist this quantitative approach) and try to find different measurement methods. Policymakers, by contrast, prefer to work with targets and using quantitative indicators is a practical means to show whether and how much progress is being made.

The actors

While the policy framework of the Sustainable Development Goals was mostly decided by states, the NGOs (both local and international) do the implementation. These two actors have an intertwined relationship: NGOs are active in the field and are therefore often consulted by the states in developing policies, and the NGOs are largely dependent on the states for the funding of their activities. This creates an interdependent relationship that may sometimes lead to questions about the independence of NGOs (see chapter ‘Non-state actors’).

A special role is reserved for NGOs with a religious background (‘Faith-based organizations’). In the world of sustainable development, their activities and positions in society are often overlooked by mostly secular policy makers. This might be because many FBOs do not need state funding because they have their own resources for that, or because secular states often do not want to accommodate the religious agenda of these organizations and therefore don’t grant them funding. However, it has been argued that collaboration with FBOs might be advisable because they are often much deeper and broader embedded in civil society than secular NGOs and they may have alternative views on sustainable development that can be more effective, especially among the religious communities.

World Bank and FBOs

In 1998, Jim Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, and Lord Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the leader of the English Anglican Church, took the initiative to establish the World Faiths Development Dialogue, a platform which continues until today in supporting faith-based organizations in their work among the very poor.

‘Green Islam’

“The role of Islam [in sustainable development] could be one of the decisive factors tipping the planet towards a sustainable future.”

(Assistant General Secretary of the United Nations Development Programme, 2009)

Human development

Development and development aid as we knew it from the 1960s through the 1980s was generally seen in economic terms. A country’s development was expressed in terms of Gross Domestic Product, the calculated total of private consumption, business investments, government spending and net exports. But this definition and measurement of development did not hold. The measuring stick of **economic growth** was gradually replaced by that of **fulfilled lives**. This new category measured in terms of a healthy life, a good education, a meaningful job, family life, democratic state structures, and so on.

Measuring development in terms of people’s lives is called **human development**. This approach is multi-dimensional and plural. Human development is about education as much as about health and about culture as much as about political participation. It deals with fiscal policy as much as health policy, with educational policy as much as gender policy or environmental, industrialization or technological policy. And so on and so forth. In short, human development relates to many aspects that concern people’s lives, not only economic ones. It can therefore not be put within a single academic discipline because it encompasses many, including economics, law, sociology, political science, environmental studies, urban studies and philosophy.

The concepts

A key notion in the conceptualization of human development is the **capability approach** which argues that the goal of development should be that people must have the capability of making a fulfilled life for themselves. This capability is expressed by some as the **freedom** to promote or achieve goals that are considered valuable. By others it is expressed in terms of **choices**: development should aim at expanding people’s choices, for instance by means of improved healthcare and education, so that people are more capable of achieving their development goals. The capability approach has triggered an interesting discussion. Because what are responsible uses of freedom, what are valuable choices? Is that to be decided by every individual, regardless of how reprehensible, ill-informed, or harmful they may be in their actions? Or should the state interfere, for the sake of the general well-being? For example, if people from a rich country value their annual vacation and

prefer to travel abroad, should the state then give them the opportunities to do so cheaply by deregulating air travel and allowing budget airlines to operate? Or should these choices be restricted because air travel is a significant contributor to climate change, with disastrous effects on the lives of current and future generations, especially among the poor?

Thinkers of human development

The great thinkers about human development are all from Asia. **Amartya Sen** (India, 1933) is one of the great inspirational thinkers about human development and this won him the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998. **Mahbub ul-Haq** (Pakistan, 1934-1998) provided the practical framework to put human development into action. **Mohammed Yunus** (Bangladesh, 1940) developed the notion of micro-finance, which won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. **Seyyed Hossein Nasr** (Iran, 1933) is a leading thinker on the spiritual dimensions of human development.

This brings us to another key notion in human development: **agency**. This term means that people are their own masters: they are the ones who decide, act, move, think. Only when people have full agency, will they be able to make the choices needed to improve their lives. For many, therefore, the overarching goal of human development should be to enable people's agency. Only then can they reach the second goal, which is their well-being.

The implementation

The challenge was to put these great ideas into practice. For this, the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul-Haq developed four indicators that are now widely used when implementing policies of human development.

The first indicator is *equity*. This refers to the concept of justice, impartiality and fairness (see chapter 'Equality and Self-determination'). The principle of equity is to create a level playing field of equal opportunity. This may require preferential treatment or affirmative action for those who do not have the same opportunities due to various disadvantages they face, thereby leveling the playing field.

The second is *efficiency*: this means the optimal use of existing resources. This is perhaps the most economics-oriented of these indicators, because efficiency is to maximize opportunities for individuals and communities through optimal use of human, material and institutional resources at the lowest cost. It sounds logical if you think about it, but efficiency has always been, and still remains, a challenge for societies.

The third indicator is *participation and empowerment*: in the human development approach, people are both the ends as well as the means to development.

Empowerment is needed to make the motor of agency work, because only then can people start participating and make life decisions. This principle may sound very social but is very political. Because it implies that people need to be involved at every stage of decision-making processes in their societies. They are not merely the beneficiaries of a state, but act as agents that make society function. This is where the notion of civil society emerges.

The fourth and final indicator is *sustainability*: The term sustainability is often used to refer to the environment, but it also encompasses social and economic dimensions. The notion of sustainability as used here, demands that all these dimensions are addressed together in a comprehensive manner. Only this way, so it is argued, can we reach a degree of human development that is not incidental but enduring.

It must be noted that these ideas still need to be worked out in practice. Ideally, all these concepts and indicators are implemented in a joint manner. But to actually do that is precisely the challenge.

Further reading

- Tomáš Hák, Svatava Janoušková, Bedřich Moldan, 'Sustainable Development Goals: A need for relevant indicators', *Ecological Indicators*, Vol. 60, 2016, pp. 565-573
- Walter Leal Filho (ed.), *Handbook of Sustainability Science and Research*, Springer 2018
- Ortrud Lessmann and Felix Rauschmayer (eds.), *The Capability Approach and Sustainability*, Routledge 2014
- Riley Quinn, *An Analysis of Mahbub ul Haq's Reflections on Human Development*, Maqat Library, 2017
- United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015 (online publication)